

House approves plan to redraw election districts

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Mike Hasten

mhassten@gannett.com

BATON ROUGE — The House on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved legislation that redraws members' election districts to accommodate shifts in state population and growth in some areas.

The 70-28 vote sends the House Bill 1 by Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, to the Senate. The Senate on Tuesday also approved its redistricting plan, SB1 by Senate President Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, with a 27-12 vote and sent it to the House. Traditionally, neither has tinkered with the plan approved by the other body.

"Unquestionably, this is the most difficult measure members face," Tucker said to the House prior to the vote. "I wish I could make all of you happy."

Most of those unhappy with the plan were members of the Legislative Black Caucus who wanted a new black district to be created in Shreveport. The district was not in Tucker's original bill but was added in committee, only to be removed Monday in a House vote on Shreveport Rep. Alan Seabaugh's amendment.

The district would have

forced Seabaugh to run against fellow Republican Richard Burford of Stonewall.

Caucus members Reps. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe; Rick Gallot, D-Ruston; Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria; and Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, said removing the district was why they couldn't vote for the bill.

"We've come this close," Dixon said. "It's the only thing that's missing. ... That's sad, because it's going to turn all this around."

Gallot, chairman of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee, said he believes that vote will cause the U.S. Department of Justice to reject the plan under the Voting Rights Act.

New districts are required every decade following the census.

Some areas, like New Orleans, Cameron Parish and rural areas in the central and northern parts of the state, lost population. Other areas, like the Northshore area above Lake Pontchartrain and Bossier and Lafayette parishes, had population growth.

During two days' debate on Tucker's HB1, regional disputes erupted, includ-

ing fights over reshaping districts in the Monroe and Shreveport areas and a battle between neighbors in Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Many arguments had their roots in partisanship.

But the debate also featured a major compromise among Democrats and Republicans that unified lawmakers in the north-central region of the state.

A massive juggling act sparked by state Rep. Rick Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, brought north-central Louisiana lawmakers together in a shift that involved eight representatives' districts. The realignment swapped precincts throughout the region and reshaped a new minority district in Natchitoches, DeSoto and Red River parishes.

The affected districts are currently represented by Alexandria Democrats Chris Roy and Herbert Dixon; state Reps. Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro; Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong; Frank Howard, R-Many; James Armes, D-Leesville; Burford; and Nowlin.

As amended, HB1 creates three new minority districts, one in the Monroe area, one in the Natchitoches region, and one in Acadiana.